Karl Orend

Angel in Disguise

(in memory of Irving Stettner)

Alyscamps Press
Paris

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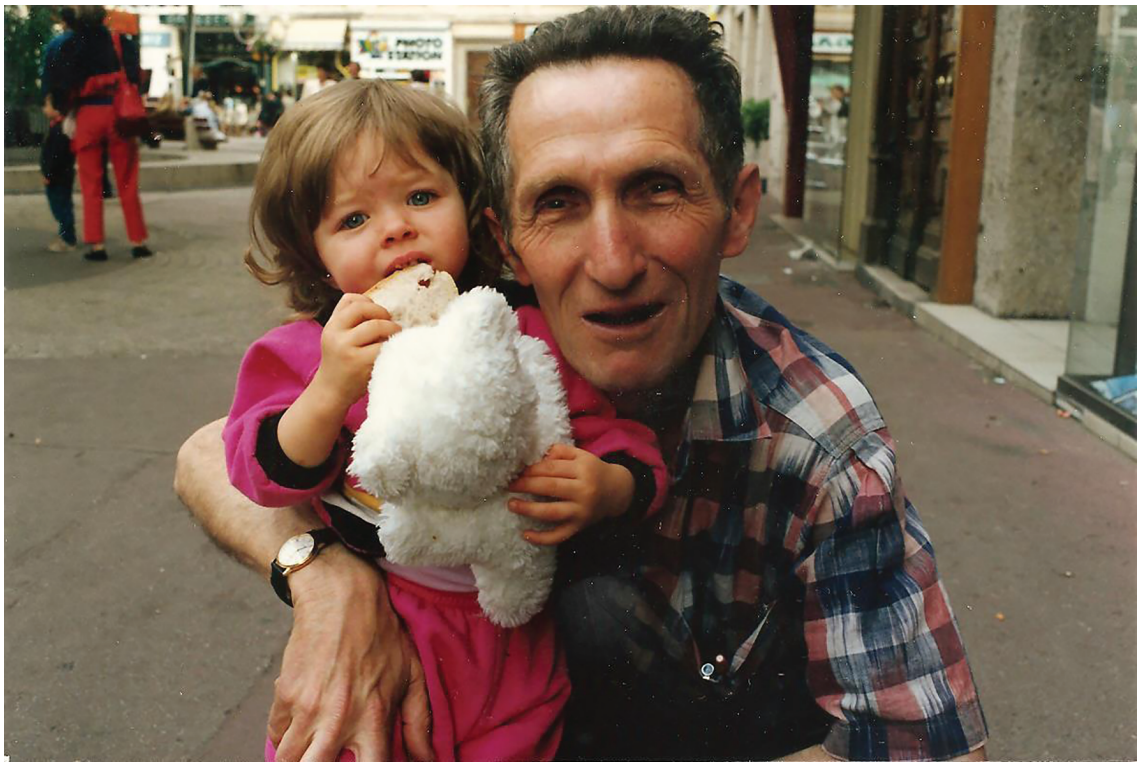

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(in memory of Irving Stettner)

By
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This edition is dedicated to Mihoko and May.

"... to make a voyage is only an idea, there is nothing in life but voyage, voyage within voyage. And that Death is not the last voyage, but the beginning of a new voyage, and nobody knows why or whither, but a voyage all the same."

"And the door opened. It was called Death, which always swung open, and I saw there was no Death, nor were there any judges or executioners, save in our imagining."

"When you are convinced that all exits are blocked, either you take to believing in miracles, or you stand still like the Hummingbird. The miracle is that the honey is always there right under your nose only you were too busy elsewhere to realize it. The worst is not Death but being blind, blind to the fact that everything in life is in the nature of the miraculous."

"Serve Life and you will be sustained."

- Henry Miller

They told me Irving Stettner had died on the day that my daughter was born. It was late evening and putting on my coat, taking a stout walking stick, I left the house and began to climb the hill behind, through a grove of Spanish Oak. At this time of day the animals gain courage – there are deer, often families, and an albino possum that forage among the trees nearby. Once even a huge raccoon came, stood at the glass patio door and, raising himself up to his full height, placed his paws gently against the glass and stared deep into my eyes. The earth is soft beneath my feet, clings to the boot – a rare cool time of year in Texas, when each breath of air chills the lungs. In the distance I hear the signal for the Union Pacific railroad echoing down the valley. The last grackle bird takes cover for the night, and the throb of hidden life all around me is palpable. The trees groan and move cautiously in the breeze, and beneath my feet all manner of things, both living and dead, follow their destiny.

My eyes that night were not upon the ground, or upon the trunks of stunted trees. My eyes, the night of Irving's 'death', were upon the stars. Every night in Texas I glance at the stars. They are what links myself to creation, to the people I love, who at the moment I look upon them are perhaps seeing the dawn rise on another continent, another World. The stars and the sun are the only things I know for sure that each day throughout the World we all share, we all gaze upon. The stars seemed particularly bright this evening. And I think of the stars in Irving's paintings, a leitmotif of eternity and hope – and of how deeply they moved me the first time I saw them. I have known Irving for 25 years, discovered him through *Stroker*, back as a boy of fifteen starving for culture in a small fenland town near The Wash in England, a region

of reclaimed land, of endless flat landscapes stretching to the horizon, poplar trees, green skies, and a Roman sea wall where I saw my first snake - the great drains and pumping stations that kept our land from being invaded by jealous salt water. Even our church and graveyard were below the level of the sea. It was a town that had once been a cultural center – the manuscript of *Great Expectations* still resides in its Museum, as do carved ivories from the Napoleonic Wars, and implements of slavery collected by those who sought its abolition. Mary Shelley's father was born here, as were abolitionist William Clarkson (commemorated in a memorial by the river by Josiah Wedgwood) and Octavia Hill, founder of the National Trust. Dickens used to come regularly to read here, at the small Angles Theater, which by the time of my birth was a spiritualist church, where my mother spoke to her father years after his death. Centuries before, the second strongest castle in England stood here, and in a violent storm King John lost his treasure chests overboard from his ship. They were never found. What was sea in that day is now land, and the King's treasure lies buried somewhere beneath a path I used to follow deep into the last remnants of the native forest, a thousand years old, that used to grow on islands in the marshes. All that remains of his treasure is the symbol of the crossed keys on the town's insignia. It was here, as I walked to school, crossing the bridge over the River Nene and walking along the North Brink, a beautiful sweep of five story Georgian Houses, that I read *Stroker* for the first time, and came to know Irving Stettner and his World. I wrote to him. I was lonely and needed a friend. My parents were illiterate, worked in a factory. I loved them deeply, but there was no talk of art or books, of culture. Their World consisted of experience, and much as I loved that World - building with my father, carpentry, and on our yearly visits to Transylvania,

working the plough drawn by a water buffalo, killing chickens and rabbits in the yard, living an almost mediaeval life, rising to the sound of the castle bells, the sound of wolves in the forest at night - yet something was missing and that was the link to the World of culture and America. My father was an American citizen, but never knew it. His father had been born there, after his father fled from the Hapsburg Empire to Ohio. As a teenager, my grandfather, who had never seen Europe, said he was going home, and packed his bags and sailed for Europe, returning to the village in the Carpathians he had never seen, named Almen. I recall as a child I spoke English to my grandfather in the fields, and as we walked the torturous path up the mountain that overlooked our home. He understood every word, but could never speak a word of English - so long had it been that he had lost all confidence to utter a simple phrase. Through reading *Stroker* I first discovered the World and the kindness of strangers. From the beginning Irv was kind to me. He was my friend. We wrote for 25 years and I published his books, helped sell his paintings from Nottingham to Paris, Verona to London, sent him subscribers, and loved the man, who remains for me the most generous and alive soul I have ever known. Someone once told me that they liked Irving because he was always filled with hope. Nothing could be further from the truth. His idol Henry Miller once said that to have hope means that one is not what one wishes to be, and Irving was always that which he wished to be, even in the great ups and downs, the rollercoaster of his life, decades of marginal existence, of poverty and lack of recognition. He had learned the greatest lesson of all, known only to the masters – acceptance. Wherever Irv was he was loved, and he refused to be unhappy, rejoiced in life and creation, and affirmation almost like a religion. He injected life into other people's dull days, and stirred up

fulfillment in them by the power of his great faith in people, life and creativity.

*

Throughout the first ten years I knew Irving my life followed a predictable path of college and work. I lived for a time in Nottingham and recall the sweeping vista of light that entered my apartment through the vast windows, from which we could look down, perched as we were on a hill, over the other houses and trees below. Irving's paintings were hung upon the wall and I recall that if my spirits ever sagged, the array of color, the yellows and red and blue and greens, the canvasses which seemed to dance with light and color, and vibrate with a life force all of their own, were enough to render me happy. Years later, through a deep personal tragedy, I found myself bereft of everything I had ever owned. I lost a library of books I had collected over 27 years, all my possessions and family heirlooms. I could only save a photo of myself aged four with my parents hand in hand. Almost destitute, and sleeping where I could on floors or a borrowed couch, in a broken down basement, penniless and desperately unhappy, one thing I knew – Irving's art had sustained me for years with its visions of beauty and of love. It must not be lost. I recall in a small Italian town where I found myself in the heart of the maelstrom, I took stacks of books I had published and abandoned them, using instead the little money I had to save Irving's paintings. Carefully removing them from the frames, I paid to ship them as a gift, to Texas, where they now hang in the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, one of the World's great repositories of art and manuscripts, alongside those of Henry Miller, D.H. Lawrence and Frieda Kahlo. My name is still inscribed upon them in Irving's inimitable hand. I miss them

deeply, but if there is one thing that Irving taught me it is that the things we love remain with us, cannot be lost, for they reside within us, in a place close to our heart. That is why when they told me that Irving Stettner had died I was reflective but not sad – because I knew that Irving and death was a contradiction. No man I met was ever so filled with life. For myself, and for Irving, I am sure, death, as most people imagine it, simply does not exist.

At the age of 28 I set sail from Paris, crossing the English Channel from Newhaven to Dieppe. I was at the time unable to speak French and yet had decided that I would risk everything on starting a new life in Paris. It was a decision that Irving had made himself in the post-War years. He had struggled and known great want in the City of Light. He was the one above all who inspired me to go, and thus my real life began. Knowing that I had no contacts or friends to rely on there, I still recall how he sent me a letter of introduction to a man whom I later befriended and who remains like Irving, one of the finest men I ever knew – Jim Haynes. I recall that Irv told me that if I ever found myself broke, down and out or simply lonely, or in desperate straits, then I should take this letter of introduction to Jim and he would take care of me. All those things came to pass – eventually I found myself destitute in Paris, sleeping on people's floors or in the subway, so hungry that I cried at the sight of food. And yet I never used the letter. I carried it in a secret pocket in my wallet for years like a talisman, because to me the letter was all the faith I needed, that if I followed my destiny then life would be kind to me, and foster my dreams. On the streets of Paris, just as Miller and Irving had before me, I refused to surrender, refused to be other than I am, and in doing so I became protected, and at the moments of utter hopelessness, always, an unexpected and unknown Angel came to save me. The very writing

and giving of the letter were an act of faith and love. Later I came to know Jim well, and found him a man of extraordinary culture and spirit, a force for life and friendship who befriended and helped people throughout the World. Gradually I turned my life around and eventually became a publisher who not only published Irving's work, but also distributed *Stroker* in France for years.

*

Irving Stettner always had a double, a twin. His name is Louis, known in France as a major photographer, one of the great chroniclers of Paris. They are identical twins, and the only way of telling them apart was the Leica, Rolleiflex, and camera bags dangling round Louis' neck. I never knew Louis, but I saw him often, admired his art. He would frequent a small, humble, Japanese restaurant on the rue Monsieur le Prince, near the junction of the rue Racine. I often saw him lunch there, his three cameras on the seat beside him. Louis had been the pupil of Miller's old friend Brassaï, and like Brassaï he had a gift for capturing the life of the Paris streets and buildings – I will never forget his photograph of the arches of a bridge across the Seine taken from the road above, where the play of shadows form a great heart suspended over the water, his studies of cafes and streets urchins of the *banlieue*, or his photos taken on the deck of a ship sailing back to America from Paris. The Stettners' father Morris was an *ébéniste*, from Czernovitz in Bukovina, born in the age of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the time this city was the capital of Jewish cultural life in Europe - Jerusalem on the River Prut. It was said that here hovels and ghettos rubbed shoulders with the finest of German *kultur*, that chickens roamed in the street and picked poetry out of the dirt. It was the

World of Chagall, of Celan and the great Hebrew cantors. Miller visited the city in 1928 on his travels with June, but by then it had faced a World War and the ravages of three sweeping and terrifying waves of brutal invasion and bombardment. The city Morris knew was dead. This was June's homeland - she was born only 45 miles away near the town of Bori, in the shadow of a lumber mill and the towering peaks of the Carpathians. Morris left for Brooklyn the same year June sailed for New York, 1907. He was as successful as June's family was impoverished, and in 1910 he returned to Bukovina to take a bride before returning to open a furniture factory in Brooklyn. Miller passed it often on his walks.

Louis received a gift of a camera at an early age, and photography became a staple of his life. Later, for years, he used an old fashioned box camera with tripod (like Atget, to whom he has been compared), was influenced by Paul Outerbridge, Paul Strand, Sid Grossman, and Stieglitz (who also had a great effect on Henry Miller and became his friend). Louis studied with the Photo League, learned valuable lessons there, but was ultimately dissatisfied with their direction. After the War, as Irving and Miller did at points in their life, he stayed some years in Paris where he honed his craft on the streets of a foreign land. For Louis, like his brother, and Henry Miller, life was born in the streets. Louis introduced the work of Brassaï, Robert Doisneau, Izis and Willy Rons to America – do we ever consider the debt we owe him? All three men walked the streets of Brooklyn, New York and Paris, with an eye of compassion and deep humanity. Each used their art - photography, painting and writing to express their deepest feelings, and their profound concern for humanity. Each, in his work and life, shows an overwhelming compassion for others, a deep love of

mankind, for all its failings, and an expression of tender care for its suffering. Yet each, for any lack of professed spirituality, has a profoundly religious feel to their art, a belief in mankind, and the essential beauty of the World, of all creation, and above all in the Angel in Man. Irving was, like Louis and Miller, always outside the establishment. That is why Louis and Irving are not better known in their respective fields – Louis rejected patronage and the sycophantic and distorted vision of what was important in certain circles, among the men who decide what will be seen by the public, what is in fact photography. Irving once described the Internet to me as 'bourgeois,' because it encouraged yet another unfair advantage to the wealthy. Irv also once rejected a poem by Ginsberg for *Stroker* because it was no good. Those who were used to the scenes of adulation that accompanied Ginsberg's every word were shocked. They said Irving had done it as a publicity stunt. He hadn't, he just knew a bad poem when he saw it, and believed that the use of a reputation as a weapon could lead to intellectual tyranny, and distort the true course of art, a path to which he had dedicated his life. I recall Irv and I once laughed in the Petit Pont, over the story of how, when I organized a reading for Ginsberg in Paris, suddenly an elderly Jewish women came up to me and said, with a malicious glint in her eye: "*ach so, little Alan Ginsberg has a poetry reading, eh? You should have known his father, there was a poet - there was a mensch!*"

I recall when I worked with George Whitman at Shakespeare and Company (he had a great admiration for both brothers, had known them for over 30 years) on the rue de la Bucherie, facing Nôtre Dame, George told me that years ago one of the Stettners had borrowed money from him, but he never knew which one it was. They would never come in together, and when one appeared

they would always claim it was the other brother who had borrowed the money.

Wiley as ever, seeing a Stettner twin enter the store, George would try to catch them out – "how's the photography, old man?" he'd yell with his one-tooth smile, or he would start telling stories about Henry Miller - stories that could never have happened, of Henry appearing at three in the morning with Durrell in tow and, waking up George and his guests, to regale them with stories of his Paris years, of the time he sat starving on a bench on the rue Ravignan, near Abbesses in the shadow of Montmartre, looking down upon the house of Max Jacob, and reading a life of Utrillo, as he cried in the rain. George knew that Irv could not resist a Henry Miller story, and George was a fine storyteller, his whole life was a creation, everything invented. As he talked of Miller he looked deep into the face of the Stettner twin with his gimlet eyes, and sought out a trace of recognition, a spark of adoration for Henry, the man Irving though of as a God. Irv or Louis, God alone knows who it was, looked and listened and smiled benevolently, having noticed the made-up Henry Miller quote written upon the bookshelf as one entered " all the characters are fictitious in the bookstore Henry Miller calls a wonderland of books." Poker faced and smiling is not an easy look to have, but the Stettners mastered it perfectly. And George admired them for it, never really cared about the money, and just laughed – he told me once that *Stroker* was the only magazine he really wanted to carry, because it sold and because of the spirit that moved it, of bringing together people of all levels and all places and giving them all an opportunity to express that which was most deeply anchored in their heart. "Did Henry Miller really say what it says on that wall?" I asked George in one of his tender, confidential moments. A

long silence and then a big grin, he put his arm around me and walking me outside said ‘let’s have a beer’ - seeming to drift off into a reverie, he went into the Alzheimer-like mumbling trance he always affected when he wanted others to think he was senile, and thus avoid a delicate question – he suddenly became confidential and glanced at me obliquely, saying in a mumble “well, he might have done, he might well have done.”

I still recall the first time Irv visited me in Paris. I was living at the time on the rue de l’Esperance and he arrived unannounced, carrying a small knapsack over his right shoulder, beaming smiles as he walked down the street towards me. It was a sunny day and the water from the drains ran in the gulleys at the side of the road, the light sparkled in the rushing torrent. He had stopped by on the off-chance, just as I was leaving, but I gave up my plans for the day and fell in step with Irv and walked him to the café Bouquet d’Alesia where Henry Miller used to stop with Fraenkel or Betty Ryan on his more impecunious days living on the Villa Seurat, when he was unable to afford the fancy café Zeyer opposite. We stood at the *zinc*, and talked for hours, downed red wine and pate, and then made a pilgrimage to the Villa Seurat itself, where Irv seemed moved to tears. I recall I left him alone and looking back at him standing before number 18, on this small cobblestoned dead end street he took his chin in his hands and looked down to the dusty ground. The image captured in my mind recalled the photo I had seen of Miller when he revisited his old home in 1968 – it seemed as if the stance were the same, the exact position, as if Henry Miller’s memories and spirit lived on in this painter and writer, who was one of his oldest friends, and was the one man, he said, who had never let him down.

*

Irving Stettner's art and writing were loved above all by the men and women of the street, those who have led so called ordinary lives, known suffering and joy, hardships, and all the complex array of feelings and problems, hopes and aspirations that make up the lot of most people, those not given the advantage of the protection of the middle and upper classes, writing schools and patronage. In his paintings Irving Stettner expresses joy - each day is a celebration and every obstacle is only temporary, as important or unimportant as we allow it to be.

What will move the World on, what will allow fulfillment of one's dreams, is love, and faith, courage and friends, the inspiration of those brave spirits, whether they be artists or writers or photographers, who have lain the flagstones upon which we walk the path towards fulfillment, to unification with humanity, and our destiny. At a certain point a man or woman who has lived his life with love and creativity, compassion and spirituality will find himself, as Irving did, at the end of the road. One day the path will stop and he will find himself alone on a wooded path, as I did that night in Texas. Each man has the right to place one more slab, one more stone, and add it to the path. I could almost swear I heard the tap of a stick, and saw in the distance a crouching figure aligning the limestone block with the slab before it, all with a painter's eye for detail. I dared not look, because my time had not yet come. I simply turned and fled. I had no right to join him in his task. Having laid that stone the traveler does not cease to be, but suddenly finds himself with wings, with which he rises above the World. The direction of all that he has lived thus far becomes clear. He knows only joy and perfect companionship, because they are his reward, for having always believed

intrinsically in the Angel and God within Man.

*

The names of Irving Stettner and Henry Miller will be linked forever. They were friends for forty years until Miller's death, and over decades Irving at first helped Miller, who was living in poverty in Big Sur, and those close to him, and then later, as Miller's reputation grew, he returned the favor, and supported Irving's aspirations, writing only for *Stroker* for the last five years of his life. In the 1940s, following abandonment by her second husband, Stratford Corbett, June was ill and impoverished, and Irving often visited her to keep her company, to help her with money and chores, keeping a close eye on her welfare for Henry. After his military service in the far East, notably in Japan (which he fell in love with just as Miller had done back in the 1920s), Irving worked briefly for Miller's old friend Michael Fraenkel (whom he met in 1946 in New York, via his sailor friend Harry Walker) in Mexico, even a year later using part of his discharge pay to publish Fraenkel's wonderful book *The Day Face and The Night Face*. Irving knew Trotsky in Mexico, just as he knew Andre Breton, Albert Cossary, Tristan Tzara and Gertrude Stein in Paris, Seymour Krim in New York, Paul Bowles and Mohammed Mrabet in Tangiers. Fraenkel resembled Trotsky in miniature, the revolutionary who Miller had seen sitting in the café Royale on 2nd Avenue back in the days before the Russian revolution before Irving was born. It was through Fraenkel that Irving got to know the work and life of Henry Miller intimately for the first time. They would walk the streets of Manhattan through the winter of 1945-6 and speak of Miller's early days, of *Tropic of Cancer,* begun at Fraenkel's suggestion, in his apartment on the Villa Seurat back in September 1931,

and the life these close friends had lived among their interminable discussions of books and Death, of whores and artists, of the condition of the World, and the lives they had lived, love lost and found, the life above all lived on the streets. Irving went to Paris on the G.I. Bill, like Ferlinghetti and George Whitman, and he studied at the Grande Chaumiére, as had Anais Nin, and other of Miller's friends.

Later, as Miller tried to write *Books in My Life*, Irving, then living his own Parisian adventure, would send gifts of books Miller needed to complete his own *paean* to reading. They were both Brooklyn boys, and shared a great love of many writers and artists, love of France and Japan, as well as memories of years walking the streets of Paris and New York in poverty. Henry and Irving came closest perhaps in the last decade of Henry's life, in Pacific Palisades, after Irv began *Stroker* magazine, which, like Irving's paintings, Henry adored. Miller collected his artwork, adding new canvasses every year, and took quantities of *Stroker*, which he distributed free to his closest friends. They exchanged many letters in which they recalled New York and Paris, and the enthusiasms they shared, in writing and in art. Through Irving, Miller learned of his good friend Tommy Trantino, and his neglected masterpiece, *Lock the Lock*, the black and white drawings and texts created from a cell on death row. As a result Miller wrote a small book, *An Open Letter to Stroker*, all about Trantino's unjust imprisonment, and his great artistic gift. Irving published it, and then I issued it again. On the surface Tommy seemed to be Irv's opposite. Whereas Irving was color personified, Tommy was the poet of black line. And yet for anyone with eyes to see, they were kindred souls, Tommy sketched in the black and grey that Irving had banished from his art – they complimented each other

and completed each other. Combined, one had the spectrum of color, from shades of black and white to the vibrant song of the rainbow. When, in recent years, Sony Japan decided to use Irving's paintings to illustrate the covers of classical music CDs, it seemed so very apt – Irving's paintings were nothing, if not music in paint, a symphony to accompany the Song of the World. Irving Stettner was the meeting point of Central European Jewish art, exemplified by Chagall, and the Japanese tradition of the Artist of the Floating World.

*

Henry Miller's involvement with *Stroker* gave rise to a book of letters – *From Your Capricorn Friend*. Irving recalled that Henry Miller was the best friend he ever had, and their collaboration was for Irv, until then, "the most thrilling enrapturing period of my life." Henry sent his friends to Irving, subscriptions, and a host of new readers for *Stroker*. To Miller, Irv was 'the Prince of Second Avenue', and for those who knew Miller's life well, this was no title easily bestowed. Throughout his pre-Paris years, 2nd Avenue was, with Times Square and Broadway, the most important street of Miller's Manhattan. Here Henry had sold candies with June in the heavy winter snow, discovered so many writers and intellectuals, and played his favorite games of chess at the Café Royale, grown to know the Jewish culture he loved so dearly, and stopped every time he passed to pay homage to the photo of Dostoyevsky that stood for years in a local bookshop window. This was the street of Jewish delis, Romanian and Russian Restaurants, Ukrainian funeral directors, Burlesk shows, and Yiddish theatres. Nearby was the Labor Temple where Miller had listened enthralled to the lectures of Powys, Harrison and DuBois. When I visited New York for the first time, it

was Irving's 2nd Avenue that became my first port of call – the places he had made known to me for over 20 years by mentions in *Stroker* – the wonderful Veselka Café, St, Mark's Bookstore, opposite the church where we attended so many poetry readings, and Angelica Kitchen. It was at St. Mark's Place that *Stroker* had first been given its name, in the almost deserted Grassroots Bar where a scaffold painter named Russ Meyers first greeted Irv as "the *Stroker*", the man who strokes the page with his brush or pen. The name has lasted, and its Dadaistic voice has been heard on every continent of the Earth. The main objective, Irving insisted, was making friends – that's what his magazine was all about. In May 1978, Henry wrote to Irving: "you certainly have something your colleagues don't – Art – Life – Joy – Sun – Stars – Love." To Henry, Irving was a modern Villon, a natural heir to Cendrars. Henry wrote poems to Brenda Venus, inspired by Irving's work. Together they rejoiced in life and friendship, reminisced about the Brooklyn and Paris days, and found in each other an echo of the creative life they had dreamed into being.

Night has fallen and there is barely a sound to be heard. I stand beneath the endless Texan sky and there are stars as far as the eye can see. The moon is not full this night, and in the winter cold the animals no longer stir, instead seeking refuge in secreted places deep within the valley. Beneath me lies a stream, with barely a gush of water. My breath turns to steam, and vanishes in the air without a moment's hesitation. Somewhere beneath these stars my daughter lies, sleeping in her warm down-covered bed. I shall not see her this night, but she is in my heart, and always in my thoughts. It will be thus all my life – and even though miles and oceans, continents and seas, may separate us, we shall never be apart. To love is thus - to know true communion within the infinite. This night

Irving is not alone, but in the company of the man he loved so dearly, and of all those who love and live in the knowledge of his immortality. As I climb the scarp and walk back towards the distant lights, my stick jamming into the crumbling, rocky soil, I see from the corner of my eye a shooting star. A sign, my mother told me - the sign of a spirit traveling to find his place in the heavens. This night I will sleep well. I know that my life and those of thousands of people throughout the World have been, and will be, richer for the gifts of love and inspiration Irving Stettner bestowed. He lives on in you and I – a personification of the lasting within the transient. Never was a man so filled with life. Never was the World so filled with color as when he daubed it with his brush. With every sunrise and dusk, somewhere in the World, someone remembers his good name. Tonight I take you in a warm fraternal embrace, just as we used to do in our letters. To think of Irving Stettner as dead is an absurdity, for this man took life itself, and crafted from it a thing of beauty, an ode to joy. In doing so, he became as one with life - thus ensuring his eternal return.

Karl Orend

Austin, Texas.

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This is copy _____.

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